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Mr Roy Wilsher OBE QFSM
HM Inspector of Constabulary
His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Service
6th Floor – Globe House
89 Eccleston Square
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27 April 2023

Dear Roy

HMICFRS – Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children

I write in respect of the recently published findings from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Service (HMICFRS) report: 'An inspection of how well the police and National Crime Agency tackle the online sexual abuse and exploitation of children.'

Child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) is an "abhorrent crime" for the children and young people subjected to this type of criminality and I fully respect the dedication and valuable contribution made by those police officers and staff who work in this area of policing daily. I also acknowledge the complex challenges that exist for all police forces in England and Wales in terms of responding to and tackling online CSAE.

I discussed the content of the inspection report with Chief Constable Shiner at my webcast monthly Performance & Accountability Meeting (PAM) on 21 April 2023 to understand better what the Force is doing to improve the policing response to online CSAE, identify and respond to vulnerable children at risk and secure more successful prosecutions against perpetrators. This PAM session is available to view on my website through the following link: www.sussex-pcc.gov.uk/get-involved/webcasting/

I am satisfied that Sussex Police understand the scale and demand of online CSAE offences, although it is important to recognise that many offences are likely to remain under-reported due to the complexities of this offending behaviour, the ever-changing technological landscape and the different systems these offences can be committed through [e.g. the 'dark web']. It can also be extremely challenging to interrogate electronic devices to obtain the evidence required to support successful prosecutions even once the police have recovered these.

There has been an increase in the number of referrals made to the Police Online Investigation Team (POLIT) in Sussex for offences of online CSAE in recent years. This increased reporting peaked during the COVID-19 pandemic through greater use of computers and other electronic devices because of the restrictions on movement in place at the time.

HMICFRS found that many forces often wait too long before sharing information with partners, which means they can miss opportunities to refer children and families for support. However, I was pleased to learn that an effective approach to information sharing exists in Sussex. This response is supported by the mandatory use of a single combined assessment of risk form (SCARF) to make an initial assessment about vulnerability and/or the requirement for any referrals to external safeguarding organisations to ensure no unnecessary delays exist in the process and the best possible outcomes for children and their families are delivered.

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I am also satisfied that all high-risk child referrals are triaged and assessed within three hours [often in partnership with a senior social worker] with medium-risk and low-risk referrals reviewed and triaged within 24/48 hours and 24/72 hours, respectively. This decision-making process remains focused around protecting vulnerable children and can change if any additional information is received, with an escalation and de-escalation option available depending on the outcome of the revised triage and risk assessment process.

Police officers and staff in Sussex have a good understanding of their duty to identify and immediately safeguard vulnerable people with specific training received in the 'voice of the child' – the term used by the police to see the experiences of children from their point of view. This approach is supported by the child protection policy and requirement for all officers and staff to submit a child notice form following any such contact with children.

I shared HMICFRS' concerns that forces are often not properly responding to allegations or concerns about suspects, leading to unacceptable delays and missed opportunities. Alongside the support and safeguarding arrangements provided to victims, Sussex Police demonstrate a suspect-focused approach to ensure that all allegations or concerns are considered to try and avoid missing any opportunities to deliver a positive outcome. I am pleased to confirm that the solved rate recorded by POLIT in Sussex was 21% for the rolling year period to 31 March 2023 – this compared favourably to the average solved rate of 17% recorded by the most similar group of forces to Sussex across the same period.

HMICFRS found that there are no nationally agreed minimum standards of practice for online CSAE investigations. I was reassured to note that Sussex Police has made a concerted effort to improve the training, guidance and supervision provided to police officers and staff to support frontline policing in this area. The Force has proactively produced child-related guides for call handlers to use in the contact centre to ensure that the initial response provided is informed and correct. Further information is also made available to staff through hand-held mobile data terminals, dedicated input delivered to new police officer recruits during initial training, and by greater awareness raising of online CSAE amongst the workforce through the intranet and Forcewide messages. Supervisors oversee all this activity to ensure that police officers and staff feel supported in these complex investigations.

Following publication of the report, Sussex Police has undertaken a gap analysis to understand better where the policing response can be improved locally. This has included building continuous professional development (CPD) time into the shift patterns of police officers working in Response, Public Protection and Criminal Investigations Department to ensure that their knowledge and training remains current around CSAE and Operation Hydrant – the national police investigation into allegations of 'non-recent' child sexual abuse. This training is set to be expanded to other investigative teams across the Force shortly.

Sussex Police has made an initial assessment of each of the 10 recommendations identified for chief constables in the HMICFRS report. I am reassured to note that these have now been allocated to the appropriate individuals within the Force to progress, with action plans to be developed to address each of these recommendations.

In my role as Police & Crime Commissioner, I will scrutinise the performance of Sussex Police in this important area to ensure that the Force continues to improve the consistency and timeliness of its investigations and overall response to deliver better outcomes for children.

With all good wishes,

Katy

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